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On Government's Rationale For Refusing To Propose Reform Permitting Nicaraguans To Cast Votes Outside Country

by Deborah Tyroler

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On April 7, the Nicaraguan government formally submitted 29 proposed amendments to electoral and media legislation toward fulfilling the terms of the Feb. 14 regional peace accord. (See CAU 04/12/89 for summary.) Among the reforms is the registration of Nicaraguan voters outside the country. However, the reform requires them to return to Nicaragua to cast their votes. Some opposition leaders argue that such requirement effectively strips the amendment of its value. In an April 16 interview with CAU, William Robinson, English-language editor for the Agencia Nueva Nicaragua office in Washington, DC, explained the government's position on registration and voting of Nicaraguans residing outside the country. He said that the main obstacles are logistical and financial. Robinson pointed out that the majority of Nicaraguan exiles between 200,000 and 300,000 are located in the US. In the US, Nicaragua now has only one consulate with a very limited staff. He added, "Nicaragua had seven consulates, but the other six were closed down by Washington." The journalist mentioned that under the new electoral laws, each polling station is to be monitored by a member of each political party participating in the election. Consider the logistical and financial problems of appointing 15 or more representatives of parties to travel outside Nicaragua to monitor each polling station set up in the US, Mexico, Costa Rica, and other countries where Nicaraguan exiles currently reside, said Robinson. Next, Robinson said that "considerable collaboration by US officials" would be necessary to carry out voting by Nicaraguan exiles in February 1990. He summarized the problems involved with the "exterior vote" in the US by stating that aside from enormous logistical and financial difficulties, there would be a great potential for fraud. Later, during a panel discussion with representatives of the domestic political opposition, the contras, and the US foreign policy establishment, Robinson pointed out that Nicaragua is hardly unusual in terms of not permitting citizens to vote in domestic elections while remaining outside the country. Similar "restrictions" are exercised by the overwhelming majority of Latin American governments and many governments in other world regions. A large number of governments that do not permit citizens to vote on site outside the country are described by Washington as "democratic." Robinson was visiting Las Vegas, New Mexico, this weekend to participate in a conflict resolution panel discussion on Nicaragua. The panel was organized by the Trinity Forum (Santa Fe, New Mexico), and the US Peace Institute. The Nicaraguan government apparently sought to strike a compromise with opposition leaders on the exile vote. The logistical and financial problems involved in registering Nicaraguan voters on the exterior are significant, but minor in comparison to those inherent upon setting up monitoring delegations, and attempting to ensure the absence of fraud in balloting, vote counts, and transmission of results to Managua. [Basic data from CAU.]

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